

Reviews

A Decade of Transition?

Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja and Margaret C. Lee (eds) The State and Democracy in Africa (Harare: AAPS Books, 1997) pp. x, 232. ISBN 0-7974-1745-1 (paper)

Neville W. Pule*

Introduction

There is widespread agreement that the 1990s are a decade of transition to democracy on the African continent. Neither the experience of those countries that have never held multiparty elections, nor that of countries that have had interrupted transitions seems to subtract significantly from this broad agreement. Even those who see the current transition as an essentially flawed process, who see the minimum requirement of holding free and fair elections as inadequate, have had cause to celebrate the freed political space that is implied by the transition. The content and direction of such transitions, however, is less certain.

What does it mean to say countries are in transition? The answer seems certain enough: transition to democracy. Yet this answer is more problematic than it seems, because it simply leads to an even more protracted debate about the meaning, the content, the process, and the measurement of democracy. **The State and Democracy in Africa**, the subject of this review, is one such attempt at unravelling this problem. First we provide a brief review of two broad and general conceptualisations of democracy, both of which have influenced competing perspectives on democracy. Indeed, both can be found under different guises throughout the book under review. Secondly, we opt for allowing the essays to speak to each other under three headings: the state, elites, and masses.

* Mr. Neville Pule is a Lecturer, Department of Political and Administrative Studies, National University of Lesotho.

Democracy: One View

Joseph Schumpeter (1942) provided most of the arguments for the post-war conceptualisation of democracy in Western political science. By arguing against what he termed the classical theory of democracy, and by advocating what others have termed the elite model of democracy (Medearis, 1997:819), Schumpeter came out firmly on the side of procedure as opposed to source and purpose (Huntington, 1991:6). Thus he defined democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote (Schumpeter, 1942: 269). This view has continued to enjoy much support, as evidenced by the work of Downs (1957), Dahl (1956; 1971), Lipset (1959; 1960) and, lately, in the political and ideological underpinnings of Structural Adjustment Programmes, as well as in the pages of the *Journal of Democracy*.

Huntington (1991:7), another of Schumpeter's disciples, offers the following definition of democracy:

a twentieth century political system [is] democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote. ... it also implies the existence of those civil and political freedoms to speak, publish, assemble, and organise that are necessary to political debate and the conduct of electoral campaigns.

In a similar, yet more pointed definition, Przeworski (1991:10) says "democracy is a system in which parties lose elections." In addition, "a focus on contestation (not so much on participation) is sufficient to study current transitions to democracy" (1991:note 2).

Under this view, elites are the central players in the transition. They must demonstrate exemplary loyalty to constitutions, and they must understand and play the game according to its rules. They must partake in free and fair competition for power, and they must show willingness to alternate in power and even to engage in powersharing arrangements whenever necessary. All these point to a certain level of "maturity" that is desired, to a certain type of

political culture that is necessary if liberal democracy is to succeed: losers must accept defeat, winners must be gracious in victory.

The popular classes are voters. They come into play during elections when they are mobilised for one or two day's work. Beyond that they must be active in local organisations in some kind of self-limiting pluralism. Unlike those of the accumulating middle classes, their demands ought to be realistic. The democratic regime ought to be able to suppress - preferably by ideological domination as opposed to force - those demands it cannot satisfy, while skillfully promoting those it feels it can meet. The pace of change must be controlled, preferably by a regime with democratic credentials.

Democracy: Another View

Here, the transition is about the people empowering themselves as one way of eradicating authoritarian modes of rule be they state, state-related, or a result of how the people relate to themselves. Emphasis is on social movements as movements first and foremost for democracy, not on state institutions and the rest of political society, from which much authoritarianism is deemed to derive. Under this view, the transition ought to be towards popular modes of rule, known variously as popular democracy (Shivji, 1991), strong democracy (Barber, 1984), a new, emancipatory mode of politics (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1994), and democratisation from below (Gibbon, 1992).

In this view, the social and institutional bases of authoritarianism - be they local or central, rural or urban - are likely to persist even under multipartyism, where the tendency has been mostly to reform parts of the centre while leaving the despotism of the local state intact (Mamdani, 1996).

One proponent of this view sets out the challenge as follows:

Progressive politics does not always exist; when it exists, it does so under conditions whose realisation gives rise to a concrete mode of politics. What are the conditions in Africa, for emancipatory politics to exist? Specification of these conditions is necessary for a determination of a corresponding mode of politics. Instead of just comparing the merits and demerits of multipartyism against those of the existing single party-state absolutism, the best approach is to specify those conditions (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1994:257).

Instead of hastily classifying regimes as democratic or undemocratic - a classification that is based largely on institutional and mostly superficial yardsticks - emphasis ought to be on identifying the continuity of authoritarian forms of rule. To see how these carried over from colonial Africa into the immediate post-colonial constitutional order, through the long years of one party and military dictatorships. To see continuity and discontinuity in the authoritarianism required by structural adjustment and how this is able to co-exist in sometimes easy and sometimes uneasy ways with multipartyism.

The State and Democracy in Africa

The editors of **The State and Democracy in Africa** justify the publishing of yet another book on Africa's transitions to democracy on two main grounds - one academic and the other political. Academically, the existence of a plethora of definitions and understandings of democracy, especially those of a minimalist kind, coupled with the obvious lack of specificity of the concept democracy itself, makes it an urgent task for academics to "bring some order to the debate on democracy and democratic transitions in Africa" (p. vii). Politically, they reject the pervasive notion that elections and multipartyism equals democracy. This, as they point out, has led to the all too frequent changing of colours from dictator to democrat on the part of many African rulers. Here the role of the international community has been dubious at best: hurriedly declaring elections to have been free and fair, and, by extension, regimes to be as democratic as possible, under African conditions (p. vii).

By seeing democracy, or lack of, as a result of the interaction of state and society, the book seeks to identify and to evaluate the role of those forces in society that may, through their actions or lack of, promote or hinder the realisation of democracy. In addition, the book also seeks to "examine the role of the state in either promoting or blocking the democratic transition" (p. 2).

In pursuit of these objectives, the book is divided into four main themes which also serve as its main sections. First, *Democracy and the Democratic Transition in Africa*, composed of one chapter that provides a theoretical and a continent-wide overview of the transition to democracy in Africa. Second, *Actors in the Democratisation Process*, made up of four chapters dealing with womens' struggles in Botswana, civil society in Uganda, and two chapters on the role of popular forces in the struggle for democracy in (pre-Kabila) Zaire.

Third, *The State and the Democratic Transition*, with nine chapters focussing on South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, and Portuguese-speaking African countries. Fourth, *Human Rights and Democracy*, with two chapters that interrogate the meaning of human rights in the African context and the democratic transformation of institutions (in this case that of the Ombudsman). All in all, the book has sixteen chapters of which thirteen are case studies. Of the thirteen case study chapters, seven deal specifically with South Africa (3) and Nigeria (4).

While no book can be expected legitimately to cover the width and breadth of the African continent, and while we fully appreciate the difficulty of putting together collective efforts - especially those difficulties associated with non-delivery, failure to meet deadlines, and co-ordination - we are a little perturbed by the predominance of South Africa and Nigeria. Granted that their size, overall visibility, economic resources, military strength, coupled with the preponderance of authoritarian forms (in the case of Nigeria) and the recent emergence from racial domination and the prospects for revolutionary transformation (in the case of South Africa), all make these two countries worthy subjects of study. It remains a fact, however, that the two countries are not prototypes of African countries. Further, if it was a matter of sampling, the two don't actually provide one with anything like a representative sample. Perhaps this problem becomes even more glaring when, after devoting seven chapters to two countries, Portuguese-speaking African countries - Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Sao Tome and Principe - are lumped together in one chapter for no other reason but that they are Portuguese-speaking.

The State

Using examples from Ghana's constitutional history, Anyimadu makes a point that easily applies to virtually all African states: the overriding need to integrate populations, economies, territories; the need to centralise. He shows how, for the most part, the first constitutions attempted to address both local and central concerns, and how later constitutions - those that set out relationships under one-party and military states - frequently eschewed these issues in favour of "national unity" and "development".

Oluwo, for his part, uses the Nigerian experience with local government to illustrate the points Anyimadu makes. He demonstrates how, after two decades of experimentation, the often declared intention to establish local government in Nigeria has failed. If anything, he suspects that there is more centralisation today than there was twenty (20) years ago.

These two companion essays show clearly that it is important to move away from the overcentralised character of the African state. Not so much because of the much vaunted, yet functionalist, connections between decentralisation and development; but because the transition to democracy is largely inconceivable in the context of overcentralisation. After all, democratisation is an exercise directed largely at the state.

Nzongola-Ntalaja and Lee say that "the ultimate goal is to transform the state in such a way that it becomes an ally rather than an obstacle in the democratisation process" (p. 8). Could it be that if we take the state to be an arena of social struggles, to be reflective of the contradictions inherent in civil society, to be, if you will, an instrument - albeit one with varying degrees of autonomy - then it is the society we have to transform? It would seem that we ought to transcend much of the neo-Weberian analysis of the African state: analysis that characterises the state as variously delinquent, patrimonial, prebendal, rent-seeking, vampire, etc., as a way of simply saying the state is not doing what it ought to do. The question, however, is what ought the state do?

True enough, there are those states in Africa today that are seen rightly or wrongly as likely, if not possible, allies in the democratisation process. The South African state has been in the forefront of instituting through parliament certain liberal democratic reforms, local government, and gender sensitive policies. But even here, as Lee demonstrates, the tension between central government and provincial government is often evident. In the case of Uganda, Mujaju traces an elaborate attempt on the part of Museveni's regime to empower the rural masses and women. Even though it is rather early to tell, Kabila's regime in Zaire does have the opportunity to act likewise.

Care must be taken when dealing with what are essentially liberationist regimes. On the whole, Museveni's regime has not been as lavish in its relations with Uganda's urban population, as it has in its reform of the local

state (Mamdani, 1996:292). Judging from the essays by Mvuluya and Kaleleka-Bila, serious questions can be raised as to whether Kabila's intervention in Zaire has strengthened or demobilised the popular forces in that country. Similar questions can be raised regarding South Africa as well.

For Lopes, the state in Portuguese-speaking African countries is becoming "a less important factor for the population" as it now has to face competition from diverse international and local forces (p. 194). He is referring to the international community, international finance institutions, and non-governmental organisations active in these countries. Indeed, Lopes is aware that this combination is crucial for putting into effect the declared objective of "rolling back the state." He warns against rigidly demarcating state and market without appreciating the role of the state in the development of the West.

Elites

Nzongola-Ntalaja's essay provides the theoretical synthesis to the case studies in this volume, especially on the role and nature of Africa's elites. First, he notes the existence of significant differences in how elites and masses view democracy: that the masses want something more than what is currently on offer. He doubts the commitment of elites to democracy. He sees them bound together by a political culture that has very little use, if any, for the democratic process.

...most of the leaders of the democratic opposition are deserters from the ruling circles of the *ancien regime* who are repositioning themselves for political office in the post-authoritarian era. This explains the high incidence of political opportunism, the endless divisions within opposition parties, the pronounced tendency towards political vagrancy, and the lack of respect for signed agreements and democratically adopted decisions that may not conform with their narrow personal interests. When this kind of behaviour is combined with a lack of respect for the constitutional order and the democratic rules of the game, multipartyism turns into an anti-thesis of democracy and the democratic transition into a kind of political disorder ... or political recreation ... (p. 19).

Therefore, he concludes that we ought to look elsewhere, at different social groups, for the forces that can carry democracy forward.

A conclusion with which I agree, but one that still needs further refinement, especially in light of the following difficulty. Because of the all so dominant European-derived ideas about the class most likely to usher in the era of liberal democracy in Africa, the behaviour, the pathologies, the size, of the African elite have attracted more than their fair share of attention. "No bourgeoisie no liberal democracy" being, as it were, the dominant edict (Beckman, 1992). Hence, for some, the best Africans can hope for in the short- to medium-term is "thin" democracy (Saul, 1997a; 1997b).

The contributions on Nigeria serve as the best illustration of these issues. Ibrahim offers a scathing criticism of the role played by some of his fellow Nigerian political scientists in contributing to Ibrahim Babangida's exercise in political engineering. Adejumobi tells of how, even when Babangida's intentions became clear to all, of how the disqualification of some from the process did not discourage the participation of others deemed appropriate by Babangida. Momoh laments the wavering of Nigerian political elites even as Babangida faltered. These examples amount to arguments for a re-evaluation of the role of elites in Africa's transition to democracy.

Yet the picture is not all-gloomy. Africa is replete with examples of elites who acted selflessly for the cause of peace, justice, democracy, and human rights. The remaining problem would then be to understand whether divergent elite behaviour is a matter for structural explanation or a matter for subjective explanation, or both. Perhaps it is with such examples in mind that Mujaju, in his essay on civil society in Uganda, pleads for a special dispensation for some political parties on the continent. Judging by the part they are playing in the transition -in national conferences, in calls for the establishment of independent electoral commissions, in resolving national crises - can we not treat them more as a part of civil society (especially when civil society is weak) than as part of political society.

Masses

In a reversal of conventional wisdom, Nzongola-Ntalaja says that "the forces which are crucial for the democratic transition in Africa are likely to be found among the working people and some intellectuals" (pp. 19-20). Since the class that is "supposed" to do this is not. Who are the working people, and in what ways are their struggles central to the democratic transition?

Using the women's question to interrogate Botswana's democratic practice, Selolwane concludes that even though the country has held on to the trappings of liberal democracy, the recent history of struggle for women's rights reveals a political system restrictive of and unresponsive to women's participation and demands. A fact that is all the more lamentable given that women's struggles invariably seek to extend the boundaries of Botswana's democracy and political practice.

Campbell argues that "the democratisation process must involve the self organisation and emancipation of the people" (p. 204). To view democracy in this way is to argue for something more than the elections and multipartyism equal democracy thesis that is currently the standard to which African countries are held. As to what "self organisation and emancipation of the people" might mean, Campbell requests us to look no further than the international division of labour, at the coercive nature of production in Africa. In many African countries, the right of association, to organise and to agitate for a better life, to join trade unions, cannot be taken for granted. Add to this, issues on the agenda of women's struggles all over the continent - the struggle for equality with men coupled with the struggle for the transformation of discriminatory aspects of the legal system, and the struggle to eradicate all forms of sexual violence and oppression - and the phrase "self organisation and emancipation of the people" is defined.

If the previous decades were about enforced homogenisation of populations, about the stigma attached to any identity that did not derive from and was not sanctioned by the state, the transition ought to be about the opposite: viewing identities as adding another dimension in the search for democratic alternatives. Hendricks warns of a continuing marginalisation of ethnicity and ethnic identity in post-apartheid South Africa's discourses on democracy. For obvious reasons, liberation politics tended to give primacy to race, class and, to some extent, gender. In the post-apartheid era, exigencies of building the "rainbow nation" are further serving to marginalise ethnicity.

Indeed, how to accomodate ethnicity and ethnic identities in the era of multipartyism remains a critical problem for African states. As Anyimadu points out, responses to dissatisfaction on the part of populations can be along the lines of Hirschmann's (1981) concepts of exit (ways of leaving the state), voice (agitation), loyalty (supporting the state). To these, Anyimadu adds

Withey and Cooper's (1989) concept of neglect (without access to the previous three and hence trapped).

To be sure, the masses are many and varied. From the oppressive propensities of downtrodden males exercised almost exclusively on equally - if not more - downtrodden females, to downtrodden members of the president's ethnic group failing, at times by mere perception, to connect with downtrodden members of other ethnic groups, the masses ought to be handled with care. We have cause to both celebrate and understand them, to understand both consciousness and ideology, to appreciate that they are not only victims of the state but also that within themselves they relate in often authoritarian ways. And yet there is no better indicator of the progress of Africa's transitions than the situation - the plight, even - of the masses.

Bibliography

- Allen, C., "Who Needs Civil Society," Review of African Political Economy 73, 1997.
- Beckman, B., "Whose Democracy?: Bourgeois versus Popular Democracy," in Rudebeck, L., (ed) When Democracy Makes Sense: Studies in the Democratic Potential of Third World Popular Movements (Uppsala: AKUT, 1992).
- Bangura, Y., "Authoritarian Rule and Democracy in Africa: A Theoretical Discourse," in Gibbon, P., Bangura, Y., and Ofstad, A., (eds) Authoritarianism, Democracy and Adjustment (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1992).
- Barber, B., Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- Dahl, R., A Preface to Democratic Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).
- Dahl, R., Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).
- Downs, A., An Economic Theory of Democracy (New York: Harper Collins, 1957).
- Gibbon, P., and Bangura, Y., "Adjustment, Authoritarianism and Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Introduction to some Conceptual and Empirical Issues," in Gibbon, P., Bangura, Y., and Ofstad, A., (eds) Authoritarianism, Democracy and Adjustment (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1992).
- Gibbon, P., "Structural Adjustment and Pressures Toward Multipartyism in Sub-Saharan Africa," in Gibbon, P., Bangura, Y., and Ofstad, A., (eds) Authoritarianism, Democracy and Adjustment (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1992).

Habib, A., "The Transition to Democracy in South Africa: Developing a Dynamic Model," Transformation 27, 1997.

Hirschman, A.O., Essays in Trespassing: Economics to Politics and Beyond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Huntington, S.P., The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

Lipset, S.M., "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," American Political Science Review 53, 1959 March.

Lipset, S.M., Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday.

Mamdani, M., Mkandawire, T., and Wamba-dia-Wamba, E., "Social Movements and Democracy in Africa," in Wignaraja, P., (ed) New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People (London: Zed Books, 1993).

Mamdani, M., Wamba-dia-Wamba, E., (eds) African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy (Dakar: Codesria, 1995).

Mamdani, M., Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism (London: James Curry Ltd, 1996).

Medearis, J., "Schumpeter, the New Deal, and Democracy," American Political Science Review 91 (4) 1997.

Przeworski, A., Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Saul, J.S., "Liberal Democracy vs. Popular Democracy in Southern Africa," Review of African Political Economy 72, 1997a.

Saul, J.S., "For Fear of Being Condemned as Old Fashioned: Liberal Democracy vs. Popular Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa," Review of African Political Economy 73, 1997b.

Schumpeter, J.A., Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy (New York: Harper Bros., 1942).

Shivji, I., "State and Constitutionalism: A New Democratic Perspective," in Shivji, I., (ed) The State and Constitutionalism: An African Debate (Harare: Sapes Books, 1991).

Wamba-dia-Wamba, E., "Africa in Search of a New Mode of Politics," in Himmelstrand, U., Kinyanjui, K., and Mburugu, E., (eds) African Perspectives on Development (London: James Curry Ltd, 1994).

Withey, M., and Cooper, W.H., "Predicting Exit, Voice, Loyalty and Neglected," Administrative Science Quarterly 34 (4) 1989.



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs
<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/>